**The Wisdom of Teams**

**Definition**

"A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."[[1]](http://www.charleswarner.us/articles/teams.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn1%22%20%5Co%20%22)

**Commonsense Findings of Katzenbach and Smith Research**

1.        **A** **demanding performance challenge tends to create a team.**The hunger for performance is far more important to team success than team‑building exercises, special incentives, or team leaders with ideal profiles.  In fact, teams often form around such challenges without any help or support from management. Conversely, potential teams without such challenges usually fail to become teams.

2.        **The disciplined application of "team basics" is often over­looked**.  Team basics include size, purpose, goals, skills, approach, and accountability.  Paying rigorous attention to these is what creates the conditions necessary for team performance.  A deficiency in any of these basics will derail the team, yet most potential teams inad­vertently ignore one or more of them.

3.        **Team performance opportunities exist in all parts of the or­ganization.**Team basics apply to many different groups, including teams that recommend things (e.g., task forces), teams that make or do things (e.g., worker teams, sales teams), and teams that run things (e.g., management teams at various levels). Each of these types of teams, of course, face unique challenges.  But the commonalities are more important than the differences when striving for team perform­ance.  Unfortunately, most organizations recognize team opportunities in only one or two of these categories, leaving a lot of team performance potential untapped.

4.        **Teams at the top are the most difficult**.  The complexities of long‑term challenges, heavy demands on executive time, and in­grained individualism of senior people conspire against teams at the top.  In addition, how executives are expected to act often conflicts with effective team performance.  As a result, there are fewer teams at the top of large organizations, and those that do exist tend to have fewer people.  Importantly, however, we believe this is caused by a number of misplaced assumptions about teams and behaviors at the top.

5.        **Most organizations intrinsically prefer individual over group (team) accountability.**Job descriptions, compensation schemes, career paths, and performance evaluations focus on individuals.  Teams are often an afterthought in the "nice to have" category.  Our culture emphasizes individual accomplishments and makes us uncomfortable trusting our career aspirations to outcomes dependent on the performance of others.  "If you want to get something done right, do it yourself" is a common belief.  Even the thought of shifting emphasis from individual accountability to team accountability makes us uneasy.

**Uncommonsense Findings**

1.        **Companies with strong performance standards seem to spawn more "real teams" than companies that promote teams per se.**Teams do not become teams just because we call them teams or send them to team‑building workshops.  In fact, many frustrations with broad‑gauged movements toward team‑based organizations spring from just such imbalances.  Real teams form best when management makes clear performance demands.

2.        **High‑performance teams are extremely rare.**Despite the attention teams have been receiving, the true high‑performance team--that is, one that outperforms all other like teams, and outperforms expectations given its composition--is very rare.  This is largely because a high degree of personal commitment differentiates people on high‑performance teams from people on other teams.  This kind of commitment cannot be managed, although it can be exploited and emulated to the great advantage of other teams and the broader organization.

3.        **Hierarchy and teams go together almost as well as teams and performance.**Teams integrate and enhance formal structures and processes.  Hierarchical structures and basic processes are essential to large organizations and need not be threatened by teams.  Teams are the best way to integrate across structural boundaries and to both design and energize core processes.  Those who see teams a replacement for hierarchy are missing the true potential of teams.

4.        **Teams naturally integrate performance and learning.**We have yet to meet anyone who disagrees with the aspiration implied in the "learning organization."  Yet, many people also express concerns over how to balance short‑term performance emphasis with long-ter­m institution building.  Teams, we discovered, do just that.  By translating longer‑term purposes into definable performance goals then developing the skills needed to meet those goals, learning not only occurs in teams but endures.

5.        **Teams are the primary unit of performance for increasing numbers of organizations.**Managers cannot master the opportunities ­and challenges now confronting them without emphasizing teams far more than ever before.  The performance challenges that large companies in every industry—for example, customer service­, technological change, competitive threats, and environmental constraints—demand the kind of responsiveness, speed, on‑line customization, and quality that is beyond the reach of individual performance.  Teams can bridge this gap.

**Resistance To Teams**

1.        **Lack of conviction.**Everyone involved must believe in teams, especially at the top.

2.        **Personal discomfort and risk.**  Even though most people understand team performance in team sports, many people are unwilling to submit their own fate to the performance of a team.

3.        **Weak organizational performance ethics.**  The team must have an organization that has a culture of relentless focus on performance, that has a performance-driven purpose (not necessarily profit driven—zero rejects, for example).

**Questions To Ask To Make Teams Effective**

1. **Small enough in number**

a.             Can you convene easily and frequently?

                b.             Can you communicate with all members easily and frequently?

                c.             Are your discussions open and interactive for all members?

                d.             Does each member understand the others' roles and skills?

                e.             Do you need more people to achieve your ends?

                f.              Are sub‑teams possible or necessary?

2.        **Adequate levels of complementary skills:**

a.             Are all three categories of skills either actually or potentially represented across the membership (functional/technical, problem‑solving/decision‑making, and interpersonal)?

                b.             Does each member have the potential in all three categories to advance his or her skills to the level required by the team’s purpose and goals?

c.             Are any skill areas that are critical to team performance missing or underrepresented?

d.             Are the members, individually and collectively, willing to spend the time to help themselves and others learn and develop skills?

e.             Can you introduce new or supplemental skills as needed?

3.        **Truly meaningful purpose:**

a.             Does it constitute a broader, deeper aspiration than just team goals?

b.             Is it a team purpose as opposed to a broader organizational purpose or just one individual's purpose (e.g., the leader's)?

c.             Do all members understand and articulate it the same way?  And to they do so without relying on ambiguous abstractions?

d.             Do members define it vigorously in discussions with outsiders?

e.             Do members frequently refer to it and explore its implications?

f.              Does it contain themes that are particularly meaningful and memorable?

g.             Do members feel it is important, if not exciting?

1. **Specific goal or goals:**

a.             Are there team goals versus broader organizational goals or just one individual's goals (e.g., the leader's)?

b.             Are they clear, simple, and measurable?  If not measurable, can their achievement be determined?

c.             Are they realistic as well as ambitious?  Do they allow small wins along the way?

d.             Do they call for a concrete set of team work‑products?

e.             Is their relative importance and priority clear to all members?

f.              Do all members agree with the goals, their relative impor­tance, and the way in which their achievement will be measured?

g.             Do all members articulate the goals in the same way?

1. **Clear working approach:**

a.             Is the approach concrete, clear, and really understood and agreed to by everybody?  Will it result in achievement of the objectives?

b.             Will it capitalize on and enhance the skills of all members?  Is consistent with other demands on the members?

c.             Does it require all members to contribute equivalent amounts real work?

d.             Does it provide for open interaction, fact‑based problem solvin­g, and results‑based evaluation?

e.             Do all members articulate the approach in the same way?

f.              Does it provide for modification and improvement over time?

g.             Are fresh input and perspectives systematically sought and added, for example, through information and analysis, new members, and senior sponsors?

1. **Sense of mutual accountability:**

a.             Are you individually and jointly accountable for the teams purpose, goals, approach, and work‑products?

b.             Can you and do you measure progress against specific goal?

c.             Do all members feel responsible for all measures?

d.             Are the members clear on what they are individually responsible for and what they are jointly responsible for?

e.             Is there a sense that "only the team can fail"?

**Approaches To Building Team Performance**

1.        Establish urgency and direction.

2.        Select members based on skills and skill potential, not personalities.

3.        Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.

4.        Set some clear rules of behavior (cooperation, e.g.).

5.        Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.

6.        Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.

7.        Spend lots of time together.

8.        Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition, and reward.

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| http://www.charleswarner.us/articles/teams_files/image002.gif |

**Team Charter**

Mission:                                Launch new early morning TV news program (secretly) by April 15.

Basis for team

member interest:                   (Anchoring, producing, set design, reporting,   promotion, sales, etc.)

Information needed:            (Ratings history, costs, available talent, technical requirements, extra crews, audience available, audience interest segments, etc.)

Goals:                                     (Ratings, demos, competitive rank, startup time and overall cost, etc.)

Team members:                     (Size of team and complementary skills match)

Team approach:                    (Economic, administrative, and social value)

Sponsors:                              (Top management mentors)

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|  KEY CHALLENGES |  HOW TO OVERCOME |
|  Matching on-air talent |    |
|  Maintaining secrecy |    |
|  Partnering for traffic information |    |
|  Set design |    |
|  Securing necessary technical equipment and resources |    |

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|  KEY MILESTONES |  TIMING |  COSTS |  INFORMATION/RESEARCH NEEDED |
|  Set design |    |    |    |
|  Start of set construction |    |    |    |
|  Selection of talent and crew |    |    |    |
|  Order equipment |    |    |    |
|  Decide on show segments |    |    |    |
|  Begin run-throughs |    |    |    |

[[1]](http://www.charleswarner.us/articles/teams.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref1%22%20%5Co%20%22) Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith.  1993. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization.*Boston: Harvard Business School Press.